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Commentary...

Duxbury Free Library Upper Alden Project

By CORINNE WOODWORTH

After nearly a decade of analysis and planning, the trustees of Duxbury Free Library will ask the citizens of Duxbury at the annual Town Meeting on March 11 for \$3,000,000 to fund an expansion project which will turn the abandoned Upper Alden School Building into a state of the art facility for the 21st Century.

The current library building has served Duxbury since 1909, when Georgiana Wright donated it to the town as a memorial to her son. For 60 years the library served a rural population of 5,000 in an era when the major function of such institutions was to circulate volumes of fiction and non-fiction to a public who read for pleasure and self-improvement.

In 1968 an addition was built onto the original structure to ease a serious overcrowding problem. Over the next 20 years, the town's population grew to 14,000 and the library expanded its collection to 80,000 works, overextending it's planned capacity by 20,000 items.

A long-range planning committee was appointed in 1988 to prepare a master plan for the library's future. Two years later the committee presented a plan to the town which called for an expansion to 35,000 square feet at the existing site. The plan had several drawbacks however, including expansion on a site that was already congested with traffic from the adjacent school, and a 5-level floor plan which would be difficult to supervise, inefficient to maintain, and almost impossible to negotiate in a wheelchair.

When the Upper Alden School was vacated in 1992 the Fiscal Advisory Committee encouraged the trustees to consider it for library use. After reviewing studies by an architect, a library consultant and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners the trustees found that the Upper Alden Building matched their space needs almost exactly and allowed for an efficient design. The architectural firm of Galliher and Baier was engaged to design the project.

While the present building's historical significance and sentimental value is acknowledged by the trustees, they have found through years of careful study that the structure is inadequate for providing a program to meet the needs of patrons at the end of the 20th Century. According to the master plan, the existing library's 12,000 square feet represents only one-third the space needed for a town the size of Duxbury. At the present time 2,200 children hold library cards, but the Children's Library can seat only 15. In order to hold the pre-school story hour, the Children's Room must be closed to patrons.

Services for patrons have changed radically in the last 10 years. The library now offers books on tape, videos and records in addition to the books which are the core of the collection. Space is needed not only to house these collections, but also to allow patrons to use them. Technology has expanded the services that the library can offer, and access to information is now available through a variety of computer based routes. While vast amounts of information can be stored on disks, space is needed for the computers and CD-Roms used to retrieve this information. The library presently has 2 public use computers, but when they are in service, aisles to the reference collection are blocked by the patrons using them.

The physical plant of the existing library building is deteriorating. The furnace, which was installed in the 1960's is in frequent disrepair and parts are becoming increasingly difficult to locate. The library was without heat for 4 days in November while one problem was being corrected. The plumbing has been undependable and the electrical wiring is dated and incapable of handling any major technological updates. The copper roof on the original portion of the structure leaks and the plaster in the rotunda is beginning to fall. The roof on the addition leaks as well, posing a threat to the collection.

Repairing the systems would seem to be the obvious solution, but the library would still be too small, and when major repairs are undertaken, ADA compliance becomes mandatory. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires universal accessibility for public buildings, and libraries have the most stringent requirements. In order to bring the present building into compliance, all 4 entrances would have to be reconfigured with ramps, at least one elevator would need to be installed, a handicapped bathroom would have to be installed on the main floor, and approximately half the stacks would have to be eliminated to allow for wheelchair access. The cost of compliance would be measured in loss of already limited space as well as in dollars. All 5 levels would have to be completely accessible in order to comply with current Massachusetts Building Codes.

Because of the problems associated with remaining in the present structure, the trustees firmly believe that the Upper Alden Project represents the most cost-effective and efficient plan for continuing library services for the Town of Duxbury.